

**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE****Form Approved**  
**OMB No. 0704-0188**

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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 08-04-2011		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master of Military Studies Research Paper		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> September 2010 - April 2011	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> George Washington: A "Grounded" Leader				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Major Michael E. Wood, USAF (ANG)				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A	
				<b>11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Unlimited					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> N/A					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> George Washington is a figure who offers an example of the best of what America has to offer. Here is a man who came from meager beginnings to reach the pinnacle of both the civilian and military worlds in a time when America was in its formative stages. Although not well educated in a formal sense, George Washington was highly intellectual. His commitment to self-improvement, coupled with native abilities, and a broad array of experiences, enabled him to become a leader who profoundly affected those around him. George Washington reflected a man of the greatest character, who was ultimately concerned with the legacy he would leave to those who would follow. He was a great hero who was forever concerned about how his reflection would be seen, both while he lived and after he would die. There is no doubt that George was a grounded man. But as this paper suggests there were many aspects of George's life and experiences that contributed to who he was and historically who he became. Washington is one of the greatest heroes of American history. One can only hope that we never forget the examples he set and the foundation he established.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Washington, George; leadership; President; general; grounded; character; honesty; integrity; Founding Father; honorable; virtuous; influential.					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 29	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Marine Corps University / Command and Staff College
<b>a. REPORT</b> Unclass	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> Unclass	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> Unclass			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b> (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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Command and Staff College  
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2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:**

George Washington: A "Grounded" Leader

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AUTHOR:**

Major Michael E. Wood, USAF (ANG)

AY 10-11

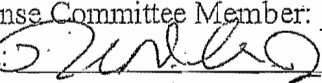
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Date: 7 APRIL 2011

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Approved: 

Date: 7 April 2011

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## Acknowledgements

In the beginning was Dr. Donald F. Bittner. Dr. Bittner was my esteemed faculty advisor for CG-12. Upon choosing to pursue the Masters of Military Studies, I requested a conversation with Dr. Bittner to determine who the logical candidates might be to advise me through the process of this work. I actually went into the conversation with one specific person in mind but did not divulge this to him. The conversation went very well and as he contemplated the ideas that I was proposing, he almost immediately settled on two individuals. Dr. Bittner, without any prompting from me, came to the exact faculty member I had entered into the conversation in great hopes of getting: Dr. Doug McKenna. For this, I was very grateful.

Upon receiving this initial guidance, I set out to make an appointment with Dr. McKenna. I was in awe of Dr. McKenna from the first week of our attendance at this prestigious institution due to his impressive presentation of the faculty, like none I had ever experienced before. In some way at that moment, I knew I wanted to get to know him better while I was here. Working with him on my paper provided me with that opportunity. Dr. McKenna provided sound, straight-forward direction from the very beginning with a soft touch of humor as only he can do. For his time, patience, sound guidance and straight-forward approach, I am very grateful.

One suggestion Dr. McKenna made was for me to have a subsequent discussion with Dr. Rebecca Johnson. She strongly advised that I reduce the number of subject characters from my original two to one. This would allow more space to focus on the individual of my choosing but more importantly, she suggested I choose the subject I was least like. This turned out to be excellent advice, for which I am very grateful.

Although separated by a significant distance due to their own attendance at college, I want to thank both of my kids. First, my son Chris, for choosing voluntarily to leave Purdue and deploy militarily in support of his unit, state and the United States Air Force, at a time when they needed his help. Thanks for be willing to accept the call of duty. For this, I am both humbled and proud. Secondly, to Danielle, during a timeframe which brought much frustration, sadness and turmoil in your life I was incredibly impressed that you stepped up to the challenge and hit a homerun in your first semester of college by bringing home straight As. For this, I was both thankful and proud.

The one individual to whom I am most grateful is my wife, Evin. She has shown a tremendous amount of patience and fortitude as I have repeatedly asked for her advice and time proof-reading this and the many other papers written while here at Quantico. I know that without her love and support, this work would have been much more difficult and a whole lot less enjoyable. Thanks Sweetie!

## Executive Summary

**Title:** George Washington: A “Grounded” Leader

**Author:** Major Michael E. Wood, United States Air Force (ANG)

**Thesis:** Although not well educated in a formal sense, George Washington was highly intellectual. His commitment to self-improvement, coupled with native abilities, and a broad array of experiences, enabled him to become a leader who profoundly affected those around him.

**Discussion:** George Washington is a figure who offers an example of the best of what America has to offer. Here is a man who came from meager beginnings to reach the pinnacle of both the civilian and military worlds in a time when America was in its formative stages. From an early age, Washington began to learn and develop skills that would provide the basis of the man who would eventually command the American Army against the British during the Revolutionary War for the independence of the new nation. He would then take these learned traits and *Rules of Civility* and become the stately politician who would fulfill his destiny as the first President of those newly formed United States of America. This paper will take a close look into several areas of Washington’s upbringing and growth to include: his early upbringing by his parents; his religious foundations strengthened through his churches and self-guided studies; his informal education; his years as a military leader; and his political endeavors leading all the way up to becoming the first President of the United States. All of this would lead to a man that was well-grounded in all parts of his life.

**Conclusion:** George Washington reflected a man of the greatest character, who was ultimately concerned with the legacy he would leave to those who would follow. He was a great hero who was forever concerned about how his reflection would be seen, both while he lived and after he would die. There is no doubt that George was a grounded man. But as this paper suggests there were many aspects of George’s life and experiences that contributed to who he was and historically who he became.

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## INTRODUCTION

George Washington is a figure who offers an example of the best of what America has to offer. Here is a man who came from meager beginnings to reach the pinnacle of both the civilian and military worlds in a time when America was in its formative stages. From an early age, Washington began to learn and develop skills that would provide the basis of the man who would eventually command the American Army against the British during the Revolutionary War for the independence of the new nation. He would then take these learned traits and *Rules of Civility* and become the stately politician who would fulfill his destiny as the first President of those newly formed United States of America. Although not well educated in a formal sense, George Washington was highly intellectual. His commitment to self-improvement, coupled with native abilities, and a broad array of experiences, enabled him to become a leader who profoundly affected those around him.

George made a significant impact in many areas of his life. A great many of these had to do with character development through areas that included: his early upbringing by his parents; his religious foundations strengthened through his churches and self-guided studies; his informal education; his years as a military leader; and his political endeavors leading all the way up to becoming the first President of the United States. All of this would lead to a man that was well-grounded in all parts of his life.

What does it mean to be “grounded”? According to the Merriam-Webster, it means to be mentally and emotionally stable: admirably sensible, realistic, and unpretentious.<sup>1</sup> In more simple terms, the basis or foundation upon which everything else is built. This paper will not

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus, s.v. “grounded.” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> (accessed February 22, 2011).



look at Washington as the General of the Continental Army or as the first President of the United States. Rather, it will look at those characteristics or foundational building blocks upon which he became General and President.

## I. CHILDHOOD & EARLY UPBRINGING

*My mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. All I am I owe to my mother. I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education I received from her.*

*--George Washington*

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, the oldest of six children of Augustine Washington and his second wife, Mary Ball. Augustine, a widower when he married Mary, was a third generation Virginian and the grandson of John Washington.<sup>2</sup> George, his third son and first child with Mary, was quite interesting to his father and older brothers. Augustine paid close attention to him, ensuring that he would mature into a good, smart and honest man.<sup>3</sup> Augustine had a strong desire to educate George in the ways of God. He taught him to honor his Creator by praising the works of His Hand and he taught him that God is active in the world. Furthermore, he taught young George that God can be recognized by prayer and awareness of the Creator's presence in all that lives.<sup>4</sup> Augustine was familiar with adversity and affliction and took it upon himself to work long hours in support of his large, disadvantaged family. He was also familiar with manual labor and would often leave his family while attending to business interests. Before George was three years old, he stood with his father at the burial of his half-sister, Jane.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Janice T. Connell, *The Spiritual Journey of George Washington* (Long Island City: Hatherleigh Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Novak and Jana Novak, *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and The Fathers of Our Country* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Connell, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Connell, 7.

George's mother was fated to live a life of sadness, having been an orphan when she married Augustine. Mary was a lady of average height and a bit plump, with a pleasing voice. She was a dedicated, challenging and authoritarian woman who would persist in being a challenge to George during her entire life.<sup>6</sup> She taught George from a very young age that the Bible was the source of his solace; the road map for his spiritual, political, social and financial life. But experience was his mentor.<sup>7</sup> George spent his early years growing up on the family estate on Pope's Creek along the Potomac River in Westmoreland County, Virginia. In this area, there were strict laws against breaking the Sabbath, having contempt for the Bible, disrespecting its teachings, and speaking against ordained ministers. Idleness, betting, drunkenness and intemperance in attire were forbidden. Righteousness, loyalty and devotion to family were required.<sup>8</sup>

When George was about six, Lawrence, his twenty-year-old half-brother, left Appleby his father's school in England, and returned to Virginia to help Augustine.<sup>9</sup> Sickly and overburdened with several professions, Augustine decided to entrust Lawrence with part of the plantation in order to teach him the skills and trade of farming. Lawrence loved his young half-brother George and encouraged him with his stories and feats. George blossomed under the tutelage of his captivating elder brother who he deeply admired.<sup>10</sup> After Lawrence's commissioning as a military leader in 1740 for the colony of Virginia, George found great delight in his cultured behavior, athletic prowess, military skills and manly stories about life

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<sup>6</sup> Connell, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Connell, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Connell, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Connell, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Connell, 8.

beyond Virginia.<sup>11</sup> George looked up to his older brother and held him in high esteem.

Lawrence's attributes and guidance would strongly influence George in the years to come.

Unfortunately, when George was 11, tragedy struck the Washington household. His father, Augustine, died quite suddenly, leaving the financial position of his widow and children very uncertain. Lawrence probated his father's will; the estate included more than ten thousand acres, at least forty-nine slaves and an interest in an iron furnace. Young George inherited some real estate and ten slaves.<sup>12</sup> However, Augustine had directed that the control of the estates of his children go to Mary Ball so as to remain in their mother's guardianship as long as they were minors. Therefore, George's inheritance was not very valuable. This situation would necessitate George learning keen business skills and developing extraordinary qualities of leadership.<sup>13</sup>

George was an individual who up to this point in life had been dealt some pretty difficult blows. However, he was also one who enthusiastically embraced life's lessons. In 1745, when he was thirteen years old, young George transcribed a seventeenth-century English translation of a 1595 Jesuit etiquette book, *Bienséance de la conversation entre les homes (Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation)*, which in turn was borrowed from an Italian volume first published in 1558-59, into colonial shorthand in his school workbook. This *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation* Washington learned during his first year of study with Reverend James Marye, a French Jesuit turned Anglican priest and rector of St. George's Church in Fredricksburg.<sup>14</sup> This was the first document we have of Washington's papers which dealt with everything from how to treat one's betters to how to present one's countenance and how to eat with company. The Reverend Marye also taught

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<sup>11</sup> Connell, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Connell, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Connell, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Connell, 10.

George mathematics, Latin and deportment. As a young school boy, George was required to learn the *Rules of Civility* by heart. They were the code of civil, social and cultural behavior for respectable gentlemen of his time.<sup>15</sup> George carried out his lessons to perfection.

## II. EDUCATION

*I mean Education generally as one of the surest means of enlightening and givg. just ways of thinkg to our Citizens, but particulary the establishment of a University; where the Youth from all parts of the United States might receive the polish of Erudition in the Arts, Sciences and Belle Letters; and where those who were disposed to run a political course, might not only be instructed in the theory and principles, but . . . where the Legislature wd. be in Session half the year, and the Interests and politics of the Nation of course would be discussed, they would lay the surest foundation for the practical part also.*

*--Letter to Alexander Hamilton, September 1, 1796<sup>16</sup>*

George Washington was not a highly educated man, formally speaking. However, from a young age he was taught by many individuals, beginning with his father and mother. Augustine and Mary Washington passed on at least two well-worn books to their son George, each one signed by one or both of them inside the front covers.<sup>17</sup> These two books brought specific meaning and clarity to George in addition to his lessons from the Bible. One of the books was Sir Matthew Hale's *Contemplations Moral and Devine*, from which Mary read to George on a regular basis. In addition, Mary frequently read this same book to her grandchildren, who recalled it gratefully. We know this from her grandson Robert Lewis and his son-in-law E.C. M'Guire, who wrote of it in *The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington*.<sup>18</sup>

The other book passed on to George from his parents was Thomas Comber's *Short Discourses upon the Whole Common-Prayer; Designed to Inform the Judgment, and Excite the*

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<sup>15</sup> Connell, 10.

<sup>16</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 35: To Alexander Hamilton, September 1, 1796), 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Novak and Novak, 176.

<sup>18</sup> Novak and Novak, 176.

*Devotion of Such as daily Use the Same.* The inside cover bears the signatures of Augustine Washington (inscribed "his book 1727"), Mary Washington, and then, at age thirteen, the even larger signature of George Washington.<sup>19</sup> George's signature would have been placed in this book two years after the death of his father likely indicating he was now beginning to take possession of key documents that he intended to claim as his own. The guidance provided and the early character traits instilled by these books, and the time spent by his parents to convey these truths would become part of the strong foundation upon which George would continue to build after the death of his father.

As George moved into his teenage years, he was highly influenced by his half-brother Lawrence. As previously noted, Lawrence had strong influence on George, but one that appeared to continue his growth and foster his curiosity toward the more refined aspects of his development.

As George continued to study and develop his skills throughout his military and political career, he found that his educational shortcomings did have negative effects in certain areas. For example, he was forever embarrassed that he had never learned any foreign languages. He even refused invitations to visit France in the 1780s because he did not believe it was appropriate for someone of his standing to have to communicate through an interpreter.<sup>20</sup> These personally-identified shortcomings would affect George to a point of inhibiting him from ever traveling to the European continent. These same inadequacies would also be reflected in comments made from other well-known founding fathers. Even Jefferson, who was usually generous in his

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<sup>19</sup> Novak and Novak, 176.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 37.

estimates of his friends, said that Washington's "colloquial talents were not above mediocrity."

He had "neither copiousness of ideas nor fluency of words."<sup>21</sup>

Although George never attended college, he was a highly learned man who, over time, built a very large personal library of approximately 700 books, many of which he assiduously studied.<sup>22</sup> However, because he had not attended college and received a liberal arts education, he became punctilious and literal-minded about observing and adopting what he had formally missed. His lack of institutional instruction did not keep him from articulating his hard-earned gentility in other ways.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, throughout his lifetime, he was awarded an honorary LL.D from Harvard University in 1776, Yale University, 1781, University of Pennsylvania, 1783, Washington College (Maryland), 1789, and Brown University, 1790. He, who would match wits with the most erudite of men who possessed the finest education of the times, had only a school boy's formal education.<sup>24</sup>

### III. Character

*... I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain (what I consider the most enviable of all titles) the character of an honest man ...*

*--Letter to Alexander Hamilton, August 28, 1788<sup>25</sup>*

George revered strong, personal character. He believed that it was something to be developed and maintained at the highest level. "Washington's genius, Washington's greatness, lay in his character."<sup>26</sup> He developed into a great man and was acclaimed as a classical hero because of the way he conducted himself during times of trial. It was his moral character that set

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<sup>21</sup> Wood, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Novak and Novak, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Wood, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Connell, 9.

<sup>25</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 30: To Alexander Hamilton, August 28, 1788), 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Wood, 34.

him apart from other men.<sup>27</sup> George had earned his reputation, his “character,” as a moral hero, and he did not want to dissipate it. He spent the rest of his life safe guarding and protecting his reputation and worrying about it. All gentlemen tried meticulously to protect their reputations, which is what they meant by their honor. Honor was the esteem in which they were held, and they prized it.<sup>28</sup>

George Washington truly believed that only an honest man could sustain an unblemished reputation.<sup>29</sup> Consistent honesty is a key constituent of character, and Washington believed that you had to be good before you could be great. And he was steadfast in his claim of the glorious nobility and timeless value of unimpeachable truth. “I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs,” he wrote, “that honesty is always the best policy.”<sup>30</sup>

Even if John Adams was not all that impressed with George Washington, Adam’s wife, Abigail, was certainly taken with him. She admired his restraint and trusted him. “If he was not really one of the best intentioned men in the world,” she wrote, “he might be a very dangerous one.” As historian Garry Wills has so politely put it, George “gained power from his readiness to give it up.”<sup>31</sup>

#### IV. Culture & Public Image

*Associate with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation; for it is better to be alone than in bad company.*

*--George Washington*

If there was ever an arena in which Washington was generally uncomfortable, it was in the public eye. George grew to be a handsome man by all accounts and stood about six feet three

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<sup>27</sup> Wood, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Wood, 43.

<sup>29</sup> James C. Rees and Stephen Spignesi, *George Washington's Leadership Lessons* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), 11.

<sup>30</sup> George Washington, *Washington's Farewell Address 1796* (The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. 2008), [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp) (accessed December 29, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Wood, 47.

or so, and was heavily built and a superb athlete.<sup>32</sup> For an individual who would ultimately be a universally recognized figure within the confines of the United States, he spent an enormous amount of time concerned with how he looked and how he was viewed by the public. Because of this, he took great pride in his clothing, forever wanting to make sure that he looked the “part”. George viewed life as a grand stage and he always wanted to consider his audience to ensure that he was appropriately “in character” for whatever circumstances he might face.

In physical stature, he had what both men and women admired. He was both an impressive horseman at a time when these talents truly counted, and became an extraordinarily graceful dancer. Naturally, he loved both riding and dancing.<sup>33</sup> He viewed these as means to develop himself culturally and provided a means of interaction on a social stage like no other. Because of this, he was highly sought after by the ladies of his day.

One of the things that George seemed to struggle with throughout much of his life was that he tended to be very quiet. Of those who knew him well and conversed with him often, many were very disappointed in what they heard. This was not a trait that you would anticipate from an intellectual of his stature. We cannot imagine his expressing his views over the uses and abuses of grief in the world in the way Thomas Jefferson and John Adams did. Adams was contemptuous of Washington’s intellectual abilities and it was certain, said Adams, that Washington was not a scholar.<sup>34</sup> This tendency of awkward silence in many situations grew to be viewed as a time of contemplation or thoughtful meditation as Washington grew older. However, there were many, some seriously outspoken, who viewed Washington with continued disdain due to his inability to converse on what they considered an appropriate level. “Most people say and do too much,” one friend recalled. “Washington . . . never fell into this common

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<sup>32</sup> Wood, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Wood, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Wood, 33.



error.” Washington may not always have been a great dinner party companion, but he certainly had what John Adams ruefully lacked: the “gift of silence.”<sup>35</sup>

All of the founding fathers were well aware of the conventions of civility or good manners and to varying degrees, all of them attempted to live up to them. However, Washington was most in tune with and serious about following them. He was so intent on understanding what the rules of conduct were for a broadminded gentleman that when he would discover these new truths, he would pursue them with the greatest of fervor, even to an extent that would awe his contemporaries.<sup>36</sup> It was because of this strong sense of purpose that George gave his conduct such a copybook personality. He loved Joseph Addison’s play *Cato* and saw it over and over and incorporated some of its lines into his correspondence. The play, very much an Enlightenment tract, helped him absorb what it meant to be liberal and virtuous, what it meant to be a stoical classical hero.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout his life, George was hypersensitive in response to criticism. As the years passed, he became accustomed to the fact that people would sometimes disagree with his decisions. But what he *never* understood was how any person could disparage his motives, because he worked so conscientiously to remain honorable, regardless of the circumstances.<sup>38</sup> He may have been a simple republican, at heart just a country gentlemen who was in bed every night by nine-thirty. However, there is no doubt that he was concerned with what he called “the style proper for the Chief Magistrate.”<sup>39</sup> All through his life people repeatedly remarked about

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<sup>35</sup> Wood, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Wood, 36.

<sup>37</sup> Wood, 36.

<sup>38</sup> Rees and Spignesi, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Wood, 53.

his natural “dignity” and his “gallant bearing and commanding figure.” He was, as John Adams later caustically remarked, “the best actor of presidency we have ever had.”<sup>40</sup>

Later in George’s life, one of the things he was well noted for was his and Martha’s matchmaking. Even in the social life of the “republican court” at the capital in New York and then after 1790 in Philadelphia, he and his wife, Martha, acted as matchmakers in bringing together couples from different parts of the United States. He and Martha arranged sixteen marriages, including that between James Madison and Dolly Payne.<sup>41</sup> The social world was one that George would always seem to struggle with even though he placed very high emphasis on how he was viewed or portrayed in the public light.

## V. Military

*I also give it in Charge to you to avoid all Disrespect to or Contempt of the Religion of the Country and its Ceremonies. Prudence, Policy, and a true Christian Spirit, will lead us to look with Compassion upon their Errors without insulting them. While we are contending for our own Liberty, we should be very cautious of violating the Rights of Conscience in others, ever considering that God alone is the Judge of the Hearts of Men, and to him only in this Case, they are answerable.*

*--Letter to Colonel Benedict Arnold, September 14, 1775<sup>42</sup>*

George Washington was not a military mastermind, and his tactical and strategic maneuvers were not the sort that impressed men. This might be a pretty strong statement for the man who was the general who led the Continental Army against the British. However, military glory was not the source of his reputation.<sup>43</sup> Like the best corporate executives, Washington believed in communicating and acting with clocklike consistency and in demonstrating unwavering ethical tenets to his officers and troops. If Washington said something to his men,

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<sup>40</sup> Wood, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Wood, 60.

<sup>42</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 3: To Colonel Benedict Arnold, Camp at Cambridge, September 14, 1775), 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, 34.

they could depend on it to be true.<sup>44</sup> George was also quite concerned about the general behavior of his troops. He was very clear about his revulsion for soldiers who wantonly plundered and destroyed property, likening them to nothing more than a mob: "The distinction between a well regulated Army, and a Mob, is good order and discipline of the first, and the licentious and disorderly behavior of the latter."<sup>45</sup>

Even in the realm of the battlefield, George always kept the first things first. He never forgot who was ultimately in charge and never attempted to avoid correct placement of credit, as conveyed in the excerpt from the order that follows:

"The fate of unborn Millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this army -- Our cruel and unrelenting Enemy leaves us no choice but a brave resistance, or the most abject submission; this is all we can expect -- We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die: Our own Country's Honor, all call upon us for a vigorous and manly exertion, and if we now shamefully fail, we shall become infamous to the whole world. Let us therefore rely upon the goodness of the Cause, and the aid of the supreme Being, in whose hands Victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble Actions -- The Eyes of all our Countrymen are now upon us, and we shall have their blessings, and praises, if happily we are the instruments of saving them from the Tyranny meditated against them."<sup>46</sup>

One area in which George did excel militarily was in his understanding of intelligence and the need to gather information effectively. George is often referred to as America's first spymaster, because he believed that a strong intelligence system was indispensable to winning the Revolutionary War.<sup>47</sup> It is quite clear that George knew how to be devious in war, where the rules of civility were overruled by the adage "All if fair in love and war."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rees and Spignesi, 12.

<sup>45</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 5: To Major General Israel Putnam, Head Quarters, August 25, 1776), 2002.

<sup>46</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 5: GENERAL ORDERS Head Quarters, New York, July 2, 1776), 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Rees and Spignesi, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Rees and Spignesi, 18.

Following the signing of the peace treaty and British recognition of American independence, Washington stunned the world when he surrendered his sword to the Congress on December 23, 1783, and retired to his farm at Mt. Vernon. As Garry Wills has shown, this was a highly symbolic act, a very self-conscious and unconditional extraction from the world of politics. His retirement from power had a profound effect far and wide in the Western world. It was extraordinary; a victorious general surrendering his arms and returning to his farm was unprecedented in contemporary times.<sup>49</sup>

## VI. Politics & Slavery

*Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.*

*--Washington's Farewell Address, 1796<sup>50</sup>*

Even after the Constitution was drafted, Washington believed that he would be able to retire to the domestic tranquility of Mt. Vernon. However, everyone else still believed that he was the right choice to become the first President of the newly formed national government.<sup>51</sup> George was not naïve. He was a man who had grown a great deal through his upbringing and through his experience in the military. But at the same time, he was tired and wanted to retreat to Mt. Vernon.

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<sup>49</sup> Wood, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Washington, *Washington's Farewell Address 1796*

<sup>51</sup> Wood, 46.

One thing would change his mind. George was always concerned about the welfare of the group ahead of his own needs and wants. He was a selfless man and definitely a servant leader. Nothing could make him abandon his retirement; Washington told Benjamin Lincoln, “unless it be a *conviction* that the partiality of my Countrymen had made my services absolutely necessary, joined to a *fear* that my refusal might induce a belief that I preferred the conversation of my own reputation & private ease, to the good of my Country.”<sup>52</sup> George would not let his fellow countrymen down. In fact, the pressure on Washington to serve as president was so immense that he gave way. Naturally, he was elected with every possible electoral vote, the lone president in American history so honored.<sup>53</sup>

This was a new time for a new country and since the United States had never had an elected chief executive like the one constructed by the Constitution of 1787, Washington had almost no precedents to follow. Not only did he have to validate and to flesh out the new office of the presidency, he also had to put together a new nation and confirm to a skeptical world that America’s grand experiment in self-government was legitimate.<sup>54</sup> This would amount to a huge amount of work in a timeframe when Washington was hoping to relax and reintegrate into civilian society, but again, George would not let the people down. He was the only American in 1789 that possessed the dignity, patience, restraint, and reputation for republican virtue that the untried but potentially powerful office of the presidency needed at the outset.<sup>55</sup>

As in the case of his calling as commander in chief, Washington’s most important act as President was his giving up of the office. The majority of people presupposed that Washington might be president for as long as he lived. Consequently, his persistent efforts to retire from the

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<sup>52</sup> George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington* (University of Virginia, 2010), Presidential Ser., I:71, <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/> (accessed December 28, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Wood, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Wood, 48.

<sup>55</sup> Wood, 49-50.

presidency enhanced his moral authority and helped fix the republican character of the Constitution.<sup>56</sup> Even though it took some strong encouragement on the part of Elizabeth Powel, the wife of the wealthy Philadelphia merchant Samuel Powell, in 1792, Washington stayed on for another term. Nonetheless, in 1796, he was so resolute in wanting to retire that no one could dissuade him, and his voluntary departure from the office set a precedent that was not broken until Franklin D. Roosevelt secured a third term in 1940. But so strong was the sentiment for a two-term limit that the convention was written into the Constitution in the Twenty-second Amendment in 1951. Washington's action in 1796 was of huge importance. That the chief executive of a state should willingly surrender his office was an object lesson in republicanism at a time when the republican experiment throughout the Atlantic world was very much in doubt.<sup>57</sup>

By the time George returned to Mt. Vernon at the end of the war, he had concluded that slavery needed to be put to an end, not simply because it was an inefficient labor system but, more important, it violated everything the Revolution regarded as sacred.<sup>58</sup> As he told a fellow Virginian, he had come to hope against hope that some plan could be adopted by which slavery could be eliminated "by slow, sure, & imperceptible degrees."<sup>59</sup> Sometimes George may have moved diffidently in the social world, but in the political world he knew how to make a dramatic move. One of his most impressive acts was his freeing of his slaves in his will. Of all of the well-known founders who were slaveholders, including Jefferson, Madison, and Patrick Henry, Washington was the only one who actually ended up freeing his slaves. He was no abolitionist and in his lifetime he never spoke out in public against the establishment of slavery. Instead he

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<sup>56</sup> Wood, 60.

<sup>57</sup> Wood, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Wood, 40.

<sup>59</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 29: To John Francis Mercer; September 9, 1786), 2002.

arrived at his own conclusion that slavery was morally wrong and inconsistent with the principles of the Revolution “gradually, privately, and with difficulty”.<sup>60</sup>

In the end, it was the people’s trust in George that enabled the new government to survive. And it was his behavior as a republican chief executive that was most responsible for making the presidency the powerful national office it became. Even an unsympathetic British observer was forced to admit that Washington possessed “the two great requisites of a statesman, the faculty of concealing his own sentiments, and of discovering those of other men.”<sup>61</sup>

## VII. Religion

*“...[I]t is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor. . .”<sup>62</sup>*

George exhibited many of the values that religion can bring forth. Although George was in many ways a very personal man, he directly and indirectly found numerous opportunities to exhibit these characteristics: faith, hope and love. George was a child of the Enlightenment. He was very much a man of his age, and he took its moral standards more seriously than did most of his contemporaries.<sup>63</sup> Because of this, George was an active participant in family religious functions from a very young age. From the reports of visitors to Mount Vernon, he even occasionally said grace at the table.<sup>64</sup>

George was a descendent of an English shipmaster, John Washington, who immigrated to Virginia in about 1658. John’s father had been an ordained Puritan minister, the Reverend

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<sup>60</sup> Wood, 37-38.

<sup>61</sup> Wood, 56.

<sup>62</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol 30: Thanksgiving Proclamation), 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Wood, 35.

<sup>64</sup> David L. Holmes, *The Religion of the Founding Fathers* (Charlottesville, VA: Ash Lawn-Highland and The Clements Library, 2003), 79.

Lawrence Washington of Purleigh, England.<sup>65</sup> John was condemned by fellow Puritans in England for practicing Anglican Catholicism and his congregation had accused him of “drunkenness” because he persisted in saying Mass at a time when such sacraments were not appreciated.<sup>66</sup> Although much of history is silent regarding the details of Reverend Washington’s life, the shame of the punishment wrought upon the family because of his religious convictions was intolerable for young John and he fled to Virginia to escape the social and financial harshness that flowed from its acrimony.<sup>67</sup> Religious freedom within the colonies coupled with economic opportunity provided John Washington potent incentives to hold fast to his family spiritual traditions. Because of this influence, the beliefs, manners and culture of John’s prosperity in Virginia remained embedded in English Puritanism steeped in Anglican Catholicism.<sup>68</sup>

In the colonies, The Church of England was known as the Anglican (Latin for “English”) Church.<sup>69</sup> In the words of Professor David L. Holmes: “Throughout the colonial period, the Church of England was the established Church of Colonial Virginia. Colonial Virginians were born into the Anglican faith . . . The Virginia General Assembly legislated for the established Church, supported it through taxation, and protected it against competition.”<sup>70</sup> George Washington’s family belonged to the Anglican Church. George was baptized and raised in the Established Church of Virginia. His wife, Martha, was a devoted Anglican and regular churchgoer. By the standard of the eighteenth-century, Washington was religiously active.<sup>71</sup> By all historical accounts, he regularly attended church services. During his presidential years,

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<sup>65</sup> Connell, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Connell, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Connell, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Connell, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Connell, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Holmes, 50-52.

<sup>71</sup> Holmes, 79.



Washington occasionally worshipped in churches of other denominations, but he normally attended Anglican and Episcopal churches. While in Virginia, his regular churches were Pohick Church in Fairfax County and later Christ Church in Alexandria.<sup>72</sup> Some historians like to paint Washington as a deist, one more concerned with morality and ethics than with adhering to the doctrines of a particular church. They would also like to suggest that he did not have any interest in theology. However, the Washington library included theological books that chronicled God's temporal as well as spiritual rewards and punishments for conduct and each subsequent generation studied these works.<sup>73</sup> He believed that organized religion played a useful role in society by promoting morality, order, and stability.<sup>74</sup> While in the military, it was common for George to seek out a quiet place of solitude in order that he might read and pray in private. He required revolutionary military forces to have chaplains, insisted that his soldiers attend Sunday services, and ordered Thanksgiving services after victories.<sup>75</sup> As president he was always acutely sensitive to the varying interests of the country and fervent in his efforts to prevent the nation from fragmenting and falling apart. After he became president, he exchanged salutations with twenty-two leading religious groups and made a practice of attending the church services of a variety of denominations, including that of Roman Catholicism, and in a remarkable display of liberality for the age he assured the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, that America was an enlightened place where "everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid."<sup>76</sup>

In another example of Washington's insight into the topic of religion, George said, "You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>72</sup> Holmes, 79.

<sup>73</sup> Connell, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Holmes, 85.

<sup>75</sup> Holmes, 85.

<sup>76</sup> Wood, 59.

These will make you a greater and happier people than you are. Congress will do everything they can to assist you in this wise intention; and to tie the knot of friendship and union so fast, that nothing shall ever be able to loose it.”<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, George was born into Anglicanism, lived his life as a practicing member, and was buried with the full rituals of the Anglican Church.<sup>78</sup> With all of the historical references to his religious background and upbringing, it would be most difficult to somehow conclude that he was not significantly grounded from a religious vantage point. Both his words and his actions would strongly reflect the contrary.

### VIII. Leadership

*His was the singular destiny . . . of leading the armies of his country successfully through an arduous war for the establishment of its independence, of conducting its councils through the birth of a government, new in its forms and principles, until it settled down into a quiet and orderly train; and of scrupulously obeying the laws through the whole of his career, civil and military, of which the history of the world furnishes no other example.*

*--Thomas Jefferson*

From the man who exuded leadership from a very young age, George was to become the foremost leader of his time. Not because of his education or the status which he held, but because he knew how to step to the forefront and guide people, civilians and military alike, through some of the most precarious times in the history of America. Many of George's actions can be understood only in terms of his deep concern for his reputation as a virtuous leader.<sup>79</sup> He was one who drew on many resources, both written and personal. It should be the highest ambition of every American to extend his views beyond himself, and to bear in mind that his conduct will not only affect himself, his country, and his immediate posterity, but that its influence may extend throughout the world, and stamp political happiness or misery on ages yet

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<sup>77</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 15: Speech to the Delaware Chiefs; May 12, 1779), 2002.

<sup>78</sup> Connell, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Wood, 43.

unborn.<sup>80</sup> As previously noted in Section IV regarding appearance, it is also apparent that George was always concerned about what he said and how it may be taken or interpreted at some later date.

George was a systematic and energetic administrator. He kept meticulous records and communicated on a regular basis with his department heads, to whom he delegated substantial authority. Yet he always made it clear that they were merely his helpers and accountable to him alone. He always understood the exercise of authority.<sup>81</sup> Although he regularly surrounded himself with brilliant advisors, he was always his own man and resolved that the government speak with a solitary voice.<sup>82</sup>

George lacked the intellectual confidence of his advisors. However, he consulted them often and moved slowly and cautiously to judgment. But, when ready to act, he acted decisively. In the case of controversial decisions, such as his acceptance of Hamilton's Bank of the United States or his Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793, he did not second-guess himself. George made the presidency the dominant office of the new government by filling out the executive branch and making it efficient and responsible.<sup>83</sup>

If any one person was responsible for establishing the young Republic on a firm footing, it was Washington.<sup>84</sup> He was a realist who had no illusions about human nature. "The motives which predominate most human affairs," he said, "are self-love and self-interest." The common people, like the common soldiers in his army, could not be expected to be "influenced by any

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<sup>80</sup> George Washington, *George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress* (George Washington to Alexander Hamilton; August 28, 1788, transcription), February 16, 1999. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html> (accessed December 28, 2010).

<sup>81</sup> Wood, 56.

<sup>82</sup> Wood, 56.

<sup>83</sup> Wood, 57.

<sup>84</sup> Wood, 58.

other principles than those of interest.”<sup>85</sup> He promoted roads and canals and the post office – anything and everything that bound the different states and sections together. He thought constantly about the future of the nation and those he called the “unborn millions.”<sup>86</sup>

George was in constant thought about every facet of his new nation, wanting to make sure that he left a trail for later generations that was both clear in direction and in due process.

### Conclusion

*I was but the humble Agent of favouring Heaven, whose benign interference was so often manifested in our behalf, and to whom the praise of victory alone is due.*<sup>87</sup>

—George Washington

All he was and all he did reflected a man of the greatest character, who was ultimately concerned with the legacy he would leave to those who would follow. George Washington was a great hero who was forever concerned about how his reflection would be seen, both while he lived and after he would die. George was sensible in so many ways. The Biblical teaching from his parents, specifically his mother Mary when he was young, would provide him with the sound beginnings of his religious beliefs. The time spent with his father before his untimely death would provide George with a sound work ethic. The enthusiasm and stories from his half-brother, Lawrence, would excite George to want to grow up and look beyond the Virginia farm of his upbringing. The time spent in personal study of items like the *Rules of Civility* would help teach and mold George into the gentlemen he would become. There is no doubt that George was a grounded man. But as this paper suggests there were many aspects of George’s life and

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<sup>85</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 6: 107-108); 2002.

<sup>86</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 26:486, Circular to the States), 2002.

<sup>87</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799* (Vol. 30: 453, George Washington to the Legislature of Connecticut, October 17, 1789), 2002.

experiences that contributed to who he was and historically who he became. George Washington is one of the greatest heroes of American history. One can only hope that we never forget the examples he set and the foundation he established.

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